

## Down on the Farm, But Up on Technology

Bob Evans finds **efficiency** in its distributed enterprise network

BY M.V. GREENE

**B**ob Evans has an unmistakable brand in the restaurant business — farm-fresh foods and high-quality customer service in a home-style family setting.

So how does technology fit that paradigm? Larry Beckwith, senior vice president of information systems and keeper of the distributed enterprise network for the Columbus, Ohio-based company, will tell you that it plays big.



### WEBRIDER'S KEY OPTIMIZATIONS

#### BI-DIRECTIONAL COMPRESSION

squeezes data, reducing network traffic and accelerating the delivery of critical information.

#### TURBO STREAMING

allows a client's network to move data more quickly over multiple data channels via TCP/IP.

It may have started as a truck stop, but Bob Evans Farms is no mom-and-pop operation serving up eats along a roadside. The brand is as Americana as Little League or pick-up trucks. Founded in 1953, it operates 587 Bob Evans and Owens restaurants in 21 states, primarily in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast and Texas. The company also runs 87 Mimi's Cafes in 12 western states.

In addition to its restaurants, Bob Evans manufactures and distributes retail food products ranging

from sausage and macaroni and cheese to frozen cinnamon biscuits. Company sales totaled more than \$1.1 billion in 2004.

The job of the distributed enterprise network, Beckwith says, is to keep restaurant managers and staff functioning efficiently so that customers will enjoy a positive experience. That means getting more out of existing bandwidth.

Bob Evans operates a satellite-based network that connects headquarters to 42,000 employees at its restaurants and other remote locations. The network handles credit card and gift card processing, e-mail, transmission of all managers' manuals and forms, nightly sales data, software upgrades, online training, inventory control and ordering.

Beckwith believes that if he can improve the experience of network users — those managers and restaurant staff who do the day-to-day trench work — they, in turn, will improve the experience of Bob Evans customers.

"If the manager spends less time in his office doing his functions, he spends more time on the floor running the restaurant," Beckwith says. "What we ask is what can we do to help the manager and the whole restaurant so that they can make a better experience for our customers."

#### Value to restaurant staff

For Bob Evans restaurant staff who rely on the network, the value is pretty clear-cut, he says. "They just understand that, 'Hey, this screen seems to be working a little faster,'" Beckwith says. "Not too often do you hear that. Not too often do you call your computer guys up and say, 'Hey, thanks.' But that's all right. Same thing with your doctor. You don't often call your doctor up and tell him, 'Thanks, that antibiotic killed that [infection].'"

Because it serves so many users in a retail environment, the enterprise network must be constantly monitored for improvements, particularly the speeding up of downloads and transactions. One improvement for Bob Evans has been adding web-acceleration

tools to enhance new web services.

In an online commerce environment, consumers proved they could be impatient, moody and discerning. Web-acceleration technology began as a way to speed up online commerce as IT directors began to understand the complexity of their Internet offerings and their critical value to operations.

As its web-based service offerings developed, speed also became a critical factor for a number of internal operations at Bob Evans, including inventory control, accounting and human resources.

Companies are confronted by key issues that must dominate their web thinking — reducing operating costs, capturing customer relationships, improving business

Domino Web Access, WebSphere Portal Server, iNotes, QuickPlace and Outlook Web Access. (Bob Evans already was using Stampede's TurboGold solution for its IBM Lotus Notes e-mail application.)

Bob Evans experienced immediate efficiencies through WebRider, including a 75 percent reduction in start-up times for its online training module and twice the performance with its inventory application.

Web acceleration is suited for the retail industry because of the "very common thread among retail customers" that employ centralized network servers to many remote locations, says Stampede president and CEO Gordon Dorworth. Bottlenecks in their enterprises typically occur in their "less-than-perfect" data communication links.

**Low-cost solution**

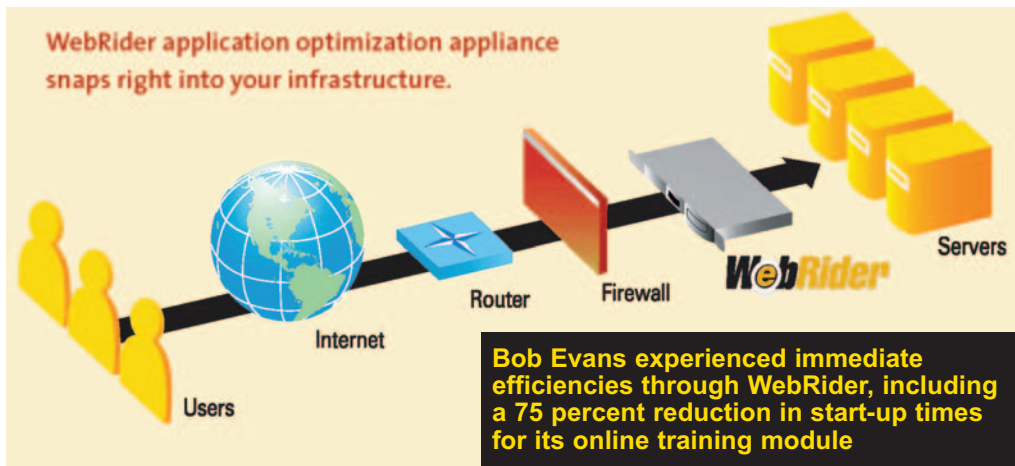
Stampede markets its technology as a low-cost solution to retailers seeking to improve the efficiency of their networks. As a software-only solution, WebRider is installed as a browser plug-in rather than as a "two-sided appliance," meaning the hardware investment is limited. Installing new servers at the remote location adds \$2,000 to \$5,000 to the upgrade, exclusive of labor and deployment costs.

WebRider is certified for the IBM eServer line, and the company says compatibility certification is under way for other hardware platforms.

It is one thing to enhance the network, but it is just as important to keep costs down. "While monitoring your network you notice

that there are things you can be doing better," Beckwith says. "The key for our business is we want to be just ahead of the curve. I don't want to spend too much money, but be just ahead of the curve so that my users don't start to complain."

As investment dollars allow, Beckwith expects to have an opportunity to get more creative with the Bob Evans computing network. For instance, the network could have the capability to monitor air conditioning, heating and



processing, efficiently managing transactions and boosting worker productivity, according to a white paper from the Aberdeen Group, a Boston-based market researcher. One trend in IT departments in recent years is to reduce the number of servers in the enterprise and install fewer, more scalable systems, creating economies of scale in maintenance and management.

Bob Evans has been working with solutions offered by Stampede Technologies, a Dayton, Ohio, firm that markets technologies for industries that include retail, automotive, computer services, financial services, government, health care and manufacturing. In October 2004, Stampede signed Bob Evans as the first customer installation for its WebRider enhancement.

WebRider is built on the Linux OS platform, uses 64-bit processing and is designed to operate seamlessly with enterprise applications that include IBM Lotus Workplace,

Tom Yohe, co-founder and vice president of engineering for Stampede, says WebRider offers two key optimizations for speeding up networks in XML, J2EE and .NET environments. One, bi-directional compression, essentially squeezes data, thus reducing network traffic and accelerating the delivery of critical information. The updating of spreadsheets between headquarters and store managers, for instance, takes advantage of this feature.

Stampede's "turbo streaming" optimization allows a client's network to move data more quickly over multiple data channels via TCP/IP. "Instead of having a one-lane state highway, we have a five-lane expressway from the stores to the data center," Yohe says.

Beckwith says Stampede's caching technology keeps data closer to his stores by reducing the time it takes to return vital information to the user.

food-storage temperatures.

"If the freezer starts to drop below specs, you can e-mail or page the manager," he says. "Those are the kinds of things we can do that will help maintain a good running restaurant and make the experience a lot better for our guests."

**STORES**

*M.V. Greene is an independent writer and editor based in Owings Mills, Md., who covers business, technology and retail.*



Phone: 800.763.3423 U.S. & Canada  
937.291.5035 International  
Fax: 937.291.5040  
Email: sales@stampede.com  
Website: www.stampede.com